
The Jewish Leadership

The Council of Elders and the Jewish Elder were appointed by the Germans to manage the ghetto. The latter was subordinate to the German commander and personally responsible for execution of orders given and for the timetable prescribed. Every day he had to appear before the commander to give a detailed report on the population figure and to receive verbal orders which he then had to relay to the residents through the "Order of the Day" and the "Announcements by the Jewish Autonomy."

All three Jewish Elders were loyal servants of their community; each of them had the chance to save himself and his family from hell. From their constant contacts with the Germans, they learned how to cope with persecution, but out of a feeling of duty towards their people they decided to stay on and share a common destiny.

The rationale motivating Jacob Edelstein in shaping the character of the ghetto was "rescue through labor". This approach was shared by his friends Paul Epstein and Benjamin Murelstein. The ghetto was managed as a cooperative society, whose vitality lasted throughout its existence.

The main aim of the Jewish Leadership in Theresienstadt was to save the Jews imprisoned in the ghetto. They tried to fight the Germans' persecution and had to face the horrific dilemma of organizing transports to the East, as ordered by the Nazis. Though they were unaware of plans for the "final solution", all three of them realized that the Germans were determined to exterminate the Jewish people.

The Council of Elders served as an advisory body, representing all streams of Protectorate Jewry: Zionists, Czech-Jews, Nationalist Jews and Communists .

The participation of the Council of Elders in the moral decisions involving deportations and differential food rationing, favoring children, youth and those engaged in hard physical labor over the old, eased the burden of responsibility for the Jewish Elders.

The Jewish leadership and the Jewish population remaining in the ghetto showed resourcefulness and invested most of their efforts – against all odds – to maintain "normal life" in Theresienstadt, until liberation.

Jacob Edelstein (1903-1944)

First Jewish Elder of the ghetto (December 1941 – January 1943)

Born in Galicia and lived in Moravia, Czechoslovakia, from 1915.

Zionist and Socialist.

Beginning in 1933, he acted as head of the Palestine Office of the Zionist Movement in Prague. On March 15, 1939, on the day of the Nazi invasion to Prague, he called for the Zionist leaders to head of the Jewish community.

He was the liaison between the Jewish community and the Gestapo, and dealt with the Jewish emigration.

In December 1941, was deported to Theresienstadt and appointed as the first Jewish Elder of the ghetto.

In November 1943, he was arrested and accused of abetting the escape of 55 Jews.



In December 1943, he was deported to Auschwitz. After six months in prison he was shot dead in Birkenau, together with his wife and son.

Dr. Paul Eppstein (1902-1944)

Second Jewish Elder of the ghetto (January 1943 – September 1944)



Born in Germany, sociologist and Zionist activist.

Starting in 1933, he held central positions at the "Reich's Representation "

(Reichsvertretung) and from 1939 at the "Reich's Association of the Jews in Germany" (Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland) and dealt with Jewish emigration and the "Transfer Agreement" - the emigration of German Jews to Palestine. He was the liaison between the "Association" and the Gestapo .

Because of his activity he was imprisoned for a number of months by the Gestapo in Berlin.

In January 1943 he was deported from Berlin to Theresienstadt and appointed Second Jewish Elder of the ghetto.

In September 1944 he was sent to the "Small Fortress" near the ghetto , where he was shot dead; his wife was deported to death in Auschwitz.

Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Murrelstein (1905-1989)

Third Jewish Elder of the ghetto (September 1944 – May 1945)

Born in Galicia, lived in Vienna, Austria from 1923.

Rabbi, Judaism researcher and Zionist.

In June 1938 he became the head of the Emigration Department in the Vienna

Jewish community till 1940. Dr. Löwenherz the head of the community and

Murrelstein were the liaisons between the Jewish community and the Gestapo.

In January 1943, he was deported to Theresienstadt and appointed as the

second deputy Elder of the Jews.

In September 1944 he became the third Jewish Elder of the ghetto, until his

resignation before the liberation.

His wife and son survived in Theresienstadt.

